

matically by 258 adherents to only 362. However, it must be said that while those listed as "Roman Catholics" continued to rise in the county by 7,148, they too showed a

over 152,000, a drop of nearly 2,000, clearly marginal by comparison. However, the Catholic figure does raise the question of out-migration to Dublin or abroad as a possible reason

ties, it tends to be more representative overall of what is happening. Anglicans have dropped regionally by 15%.

Presbyterians, by contrast, have

numbers are up every where except in North Tipperary, where they disappeared entirely after losing four of their adherents in the past decade. Their latest numbers are: County

ed religions"—where the increases have been several-fold, reaching several hundred in each of the three counties as well as the city.

Central Statistics Office

# Michael Noonan: My fate

## Leadership challenge threatens local crisis

By JIMMY WOLFE in Limerick and EUGENE PHELAN at Leinster House

TUESDAY'S failed leadership challenge to John Bruton, now threatens a major crisis for Fine Gael in both Limerick constituencies.

The banishment of leadership challenger Michael Noonan to the back-benches, which is expected, could devastate the party in Limerick East and split the Limerick West ranks down the middle.

Anger is already being directed at Senator Dan Neville who dashed back from Namibia to vote for John Bruton.

"Some felt that Dan could have avoided having to go against a fellow West Limerickman, Michael Noonan, as he had reasonable grounds for not being present," said one senior party source.

"While it was not a contest between Bruton and Noonan, this is the way it is seen. His problem is not made better by the strong support Michael Finucane has given his fellow Limerickman.

"While Finucane may not be in the good books with John Bruton, people in the constituency will feel that



Dash: Mr Neville (LL)

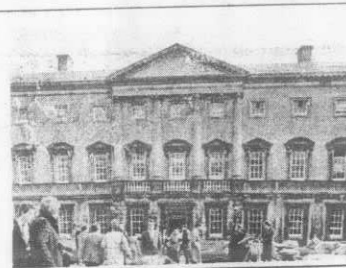
he stood by another West Limerickman at a crucial time."

In Limerick East the long-standing divisions will be worsened and Mr Noonan's political enemies within Fine Gael will try and exacerbate his ill fortune.

Senator Neville would not confirm which way he voted, but it is generally acknowledged that he sided with Mr Bruton in the confidence vote in which all 66 parliamentary party members voted. The other Limerick parliamentary party members, Deputy Noonan, Deputy Finucane and MEP John Cushnahan voted against Mr Bruton.

Caherdavin branch officer, Timmy O'Connor, a native of Broadford, West Limerick, commented:

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From EUGENE PHELAN at Leinster House

ALTHOUGH still tipped by senior members of the party as the next leader of Fine Gael, Deputy Michael Noonan this Thursday put a firm halt to the leadership debate.

"I am not going to repeat that now, because it would sound divisive," he told me when asked if he would be remaining as a leadership contender.

"I accept the decision of the party, and I have no further comment to make on the leadership issue."

Philosophical about this week's decision that gave Deputy John Bruton a vote of confidence and put his own leadership aspirations on hold, Mr Noonan tendered his front-bench resignation this Wednesday.

"It is up to him (Mr Bruton) to accept what he wants me to do, if anything," he told me in an interview at his office in Dail Eireann.

Asked if he expected Mr Bruton to plead with him to stay on the front bench, he replied: "I don't think he will plead with me but if he wants to discuss the situation fully with me, I am available."

"Everybody has to play a role

in the party that is suitable to him. I will be tendering my resignation, and it is up to him to react to that."

Asked whether this week's events had damaged him politically, Mr Noonan remarked: "It is always hard for someone to decide what the effect is. It is up to my colleagues in the party and the public to decide."

Mr Noonan says that Mr Bruton and those close to him accept that he had nothing to do with this confidence motion.

However, he now finds himself on the back benches and says: "I will be a very good constituency TD. If I have a lesser role than I have had for the last 12 years or so, then I will be devoting more time to the constituency."

While Mr Noonan is an obvi-

ous loser at least for the time being, so is his able lieutenant, Limerick West's Deputy Michael Finucane, who was poised for a front bench position under Mr Noonan.

He and MEP John Cushnahan spoke against the party leader at the seven-and-a-half hour meeting, which has left the party divided down the middle.

While he won the vote by a small undisclosed margin, Mr Bruton's leadership is still under threat. But Mr Noonan's decision to go public on the leadership, after the "Gang of Four" had asked Mr Bruton to resign, is now seen as a tactical mistake.

While it is easy to be wise after the event, most believe he should have waited until after Tuesday's vote of confidence to declare his intentions.

Whether Mr Noonan's leadership aspirations have been irreparably damaged remains to be seen.

Considering it was a major leadership battle, there was little or no "buzz" in Leinster House on Tuesday.

Only a handful of John Bruton's supporters from County Meath celebrated in the Dail bar, and this aside, there was no real atmosphere to go with the importance of the occasion.

## NEW ARRIVALS



## Frank Finucane wins backing

By NORMA PRENDIVILLE

JOHN Bruton would not have won a vote of confi-



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## Weather

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## Crisis?

• P1

"While there was a big celebration in Mr Bruton's home town of Dunboyne on Tuesday night, I'm sure it was nothing compared to the celebrations at Fianna Fail and the PDs headquarters in Dublin the same night."

In what is seen as an effort to divert any blame, this Wednesday, Senator Neville predicted that Michael Noonan would yet be leader of the party.

"I think regardless of my stand on any present leader, I want to see in the future Michael Noonan as leader of the party," he said.

"I don't know when, but I know he will be a leader of the future. I hope one day John Bruton will be Taoiseach, but I am certain Michael Noonan will," he told me this Thursday.

The jet-lagged Rathkeale senator, who admitted to being "too tired" to speak at Tuesday's marathon meeting, refused to disclose who he voted for, though the media daubed him a Bruton man.

"I was surprised when I read in the papers, without asking me, that they all had decided which way I would vote," he said.

"I did not make my mind up on the issue until I came here."

The tanned senator had spent a week with the National Democratic Institute in Namibia, helping to set up a new upper house in their parliament, when he decided to make the hectic dash home.

The NDI is funded by the American government to assist new democracies in the Third World to function, and Senator Neville was Ireland's only representative on the Namibian delegation.

He was staying at a game ranch in the bush, 200 miles from Windhoek Airport, with one telephone connected to six houses.

"It was difficult to make a contact for that reason, but my secretary, Irene Delaney, made contact with me last Friday," he revealed.

"The position was that I spoke to Senator Maurice Manning, who was unsure of the outcome, and how it would work, so he made an arrangement that I would

"I failed to contact him on Sunday. I could not get through, and my wife could not get through, so I decided even without the information, I should endeavour to get home," he told me.

It took him 26 hours to fly from Windhoek to Johannesburg, and from there to London, and eventually on to Shannon.

"I then had to drive to Dublin immediately on Monday night because of the weather conditions," he explained.

Senator Neville said the had telephoned his wife, Goretti, from Johannesburg, telling her that he was trying to get home.

"I was unaware of the situation until I read the Irish times on my way over from London," he declared, "That was the first indication I had of the situation."

"I am not saying what way I voted. It was a secret ballot, and I believe party issues should be decided within the parliamentary party on the basis of what is best for Fine Gael and the people it represents."

"That has always been my view."

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**On Monday next at 8 p.m., in the drawing-room atmosphere of the East Room in Plassey House, University of Limerick, Kathleen Watkins will share her favourite poems, stories and anecdotes and will welcome questions and exchanges. Punch reception, 7.30. Tickets £10 available at Limerick Leader, Dolman Restaurant, Belltable Arts Centre. The event is in aid of the Mary Wilson Appeal Fund.**

## Swan saved

LIMERICK firemen took only a few minutes to rescue a swan from the roof of a house at Assumpta park, about 2 pm on Monday.